

3-23-25 Sermon: “The One Good Thing” – Psalm 73 & 127

We continue this morning with our Lenten series on Wisdom literature. We kicked it off two Sundays ago with the Book of Proverbs, and this week we are digging into the Book of Psalms.

Not all the psalms are wisdom literature. But the two Rhonda read for us this morning – Psalm 73 and Psalm 127 – are among a handful of psalms that Biblical scholars believe come from the wisdom tradition. There are a few characteristics that they look for, themes that make us say, “Oh yes, this was written by those people interested in the pursuit of wisdom.”

For example wisdom scriptures are about the ordinary stuff of daily life. Wisdom writers have neither time nor patience for angels and miracles; they are interested in the day-to-day. Look at Psalm 127 – it’s about building a house, going to work, raising kids.

Another is that wisdom literature is very concerned with the problem of “the righteous” versus “the wicked.” Wisdom writers posit that if God is in control, there ought to be some sort of moral order to this universe. The righteous *should* prosper, and the wicked *should* suffer. Right? Of course, life rarely works that way. And *that* is the problem all this wisdom literature is trying to address.

Now, before we go any further, it’s worth addressing this black-and-white worldview – “the righteous” versus “the wicked.” Because we have a more nuanced understanding of humanity than that. We recognize that all people contain both righteousness and wickedness – good *and* evil. We are saints and sinners, every one of us – complex people, always capable of good, yet always in need of redemption by God’s grace.

The wisdom writers understood this too. But they are less interested in our existential moral state and more interested in our *behavior*. So they write in stereotypes, caricatures of righteousness and wickedness, and they call us to pursue what is righteous and avoid what is wicked. In wisdom literature, the moral life is the choice between two different paths: the way of the righteous, or the way of the wicked. Every time we have a decision to make, we come to a crossroads, a choice to make: Will we go the righteous way, or the wicked way?

Psalm 73 is all about the problem of the wicked. The psalmist is a religious teacher who is deeply distressed by the fact that the wicked are prospering. “They have no pain!” the psalmist cries out, “They are not in trouble as others are. Pride is their necklace, violence covers them like a garment, and yet the people turn and praise them!” The moral order has been turned upside down, wickedness triumphs over righteousness, so the psalmist raises his fist to the sky and says, “Where are you, God? This is not right!”

We know this distress intimately, don’t we? We who are living through these early months of 2025 are watching people commit *unspeakable* wickedness – often in God’s name – and we feel powerless to stop it. People’s livelihoods and healthcare are being threatened, folks are being unlawfully detained because of the color of their skin, the rule of law and democracy are being brought into question – and we, too, cry to God, “How can this be?”

Psalm 73 begins with the psalmist’s outrage and despair...but it ends with assurance and hope. So, what changes? What moves the psalmist from desolation to consolation?

He goes to church! Look at verses 16-17: Everything seemed a wearisome task, “until I went into the sanctuary of God; there I perceived the wicked’s end.”

What transforms the psalmist’s dejection into joy? He experiences the presence of God. It’s such a simple answer, and such a strange one.

Before going to the sanctuary, our psalmist has tried to reason his way through this moral conundrum. He is a teacher, after all, he is wise – he *should* be able to figure this one out. The people of God have asked him for an answer: Why do the wicked prosper? And try has he might, he has nothing to offer them, until he goes to the sanctuary and sits in God's presence.

And then he comes home to his people and says, "God is continually with us. Those who are far from God will perish. But it is good to be near God, to make our refuge."

This answer fascinates me because it is so intellectually *unsatisfying*. Why do the wicked prosper? Fear not, God is with us.

It fascinates me because this is the answer we keep getting from the wisdom literature! When we think of wisdom, we think of our heads, right? Wisdom is about having understand, foresight, the right knowledge to make the right decisions in difficult circumstances.

But the Wisdom Scriptures keep pushing us from our heads...into our hearts.

Wisdom, says the Book of Proverbs is about a relationship with Lady Wisdom, the animating force of all Creation. Wisdom, say the psalms, is the experience of the presence of God, and the choice to build everything we do on that rock-solid foundation. Wisdom, it turns out, is not something that can be learned; it is something that must be lived and *loved* into being.

This is difficult for Presbyterians...because we *love* to stay in our heads. You can hear it in the language we use: We don't have "faith formation" or "devotionals," we have "Bible studies." We dress our ministers in academic robes, we refer to our Scripture readings as "lessons;" we Presbyterians are very adept at loving God with our whole *minds*.

Engaging our faith through our intellect is a beautiful thing to do. But intellect and reason have their limits. Because God is not something that we can figure out; God is *someone* that we must know and experience.

I wonder...have *you* ever had an experience like Psalm 73? A time when God's presence overwhelmed you, and you knew at the core of your being, that it would be ok? A moment when love saved you in a way that words can't describe? An experience when the answer you were looking for came not through the expected pathways, but simply through reassurance that you were – and are – God's beloved?

At the end of the day, that is the *one thing* that distinguishes the righteous from the wicked. The wise from the foolish. The experience of ongoing relationship with God.

God's presence, the psalmist tells his people, is the *one good thing*, the one thing that matters. "Whom have I in heaven but you?" he sings, "And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

The psalmist is no longer troubled by the prosperity of the wicked because he realizes that the wicked lack the one thing that matters – the presence of God.

Apart from God, nothing is good. But founded on God, *anything* can be transformed into goodness. Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. But founded on God's love and justice and grace, even the measliest of shacks becomes a blessed place of dwelling.

Friends, this is the answer we get to the question of evil: The presence of an ever-loving God. It does not satisfy our minds, that's for sure. Can it satisfy our hearts?

Can we answer the power of evil by building spaces of love? By making God our refuge and offering that refuge to one another?

Remains to be seen, I guess. But let us try.